

Collaborative for Innovative Leadership: Youth Development Pilot National Park Service Update #2 – March 2012

This report provides an update on the Youth Development Pilot for the Collaborative for Innovative Leadership.¹ It describes the interactions occurring among youth development practitioners in this pilot network, including the benefits and challenges experienced during the first few months of implementation. As is typical of online communities, levels of participation range widely across the group – with a small group leading the way. This report discusses the valuable learning that has resulted from interactions with a cross-section of participants and outlines the forms of technical assistance that are being offered to all members of the pilot.

Learning from Early Activity in the Pilot Network

The pilot is serving as a “learning lab.” The following evaluation tools are being used to gather information about the pilot:

- **Observations of activity on the Socialtext platform** are tracking the types of questions and information posted, along with the affinity groups formed.
- **Telephone focus groups** are providing insight into the usefulness of the communication tools, the benefits and challenges experienced by participants, and suggestions for building the network.
- **Individualized outreach to non-active members** of the pilot is helping to identify barriers they are encountering and provide customized technical support.
- **Participation statistics** available through Socialtext and Google analytics are enabling continued monitoring of activity on the pilot platform.
- **Tracking of Support Team efforts** is documenting the types of assistance needed by participants and the time required for this support function.
- **Member surveys** are helping to identify ongoing training needs and to assess participants’ perspectives on key components of the project.

Communities of Practice are groups of practitioners who:

- are passionate about a shared topic or program area
- connect horizontally across organizational and geographic boundaries
- become more effective at their work through sharing information, experience, knowledge and lessons learned.

¹ Formerly referred to as the Network for Innovation and Creativity

Pioneer: one that begins or helps develop something new and prepares a way for others to follow

– Webster’s Third New International Dictionary

Meg Wheatley emphasizes the need to “illuminate pioneering efforts” as we learn new ways of working. As part of the evaluation process, focus group discussions have been conducted by phone with some of the most active members of the Youth Development Network. These

facilitated discussions have yielded in-depth feedback on members’ early experiences with the pilot, including the following observations regarding the value of this emerging network.

I’ve made some good contacts with people that I would not have made in any other way. Things like [a fellow participant] posting that education flyer this morning – that was perfect! It’s been a great place to make contacts with people who have similar needs and objectives, so we can save some time and we’re not all doing the same thing in 395 different places – making the wheel 400 times over. Getting people to share things benefits everybody.

One thing that has worked really well is being able to see who is tagged in the ProRanger program. Actually being able to find them on this page – see who they are and what else they’re working on – is really helpful. It’s much easier than sending a blind email without knowing anything about them.

I like the immediacy of it. You have a face with a name, which makes it more personal. We’re all kind of going through the same concerns and challenges – and I find it rewarding that I’m not out there by myself. I enjoy being able to chat with people and get an immediate answer.

It’s allowed me an opportunity to interact with people that I may not usually have interacted with. As a new employee, I’m now more aware of who’s doing what where. I’m getting different perspectives on what’s going on. [A pilot participant] posted that he needed [physical] activities for kids. A bunch of us sent him different ideas. To be able to get ideas from all over the country has a lot of potential in that you can get a large amount of information that you may not readily have had access to. I’ve started interacting with at least twelve different people on the site.

The Support Team has been immediately incorporating feedback from participants to address identified challenges. For instance, some participants found it challenging to get “up and running” on the Youth Development Network platform, since this sort of social

media technology is new to them or they face many other demands on their time. Others found the basic software features easy to navigate, but they needed further training in order to maximize their use of the platform – particularly collaboration tools such as “wiki pages” set up in designated workspaces to share ideas and resources on particular topics. These and other findings from the evaluation are being used to enhance the types of technical support and facilitation provided (as discussed below in “Next Steps for the Pilot.”) Additional focus groups will be conducted in the coming months to gather continued feedback from a wider circle of participants.

Participation in the Network

The network is still in its early stages of development, and participation on the platform is similar to that observed in other online communities. Use tends to fluctuate over time, with peaks around organized activities such as trainings and requests for information. Participants on the network can be categorized into one of four different groups: readers, novice users, regular users, and community leaders.

Participation Statistics from Nov. 2011 – Feb. 2012:

- 80 participants signed onto the platform (96 total participants)
- 57 different participants contributed to the site
- 71% of visitors have contributed to the site
- 18 affinity groups were formed by participants on topics such as teacher-ranger-teacher, internships, and social media

Readers – Currently, many community members are still mainly observing the activities on the platform. They are reading postings on the site but are not (yet) contributing to the discussion.

Novice users – A significant number of participants are still getting “up and running” on the platform and heading towards more active participation. They are gradually working to become more familiar with the site and to post comments and questions.

Regular users – A small but significant number of participants (approximately 9%) have become steady contributors to ongoing discussions among community members. They are using the platform several times a week to post resource materials, ask and answer questions, and make connections with colleagues from across the Service.

Community leaders – While the network is still in its early stages, several regular users are beginning to transition into community leaders. They are starting to foster interactions among community members and help sustain participation within affinity groups and the larger community.

Common Participation Styles Observed in Online Communities

Core participants: Regular Users and Community Leaders

There are usually a small group of people who quickly adapt to online interaction and provide a large proportion of an online group's activity. Some speculate that **10% of the membership make up 90% of the community activity**. These individuals visit frequently and interact, contribute or post often. They are important members. Understanding and meeting their needs will go a long way to making your community successful. They can be a source of volunteer leadership (hosts, cybrarians, greeters) and ideas for improving the community.

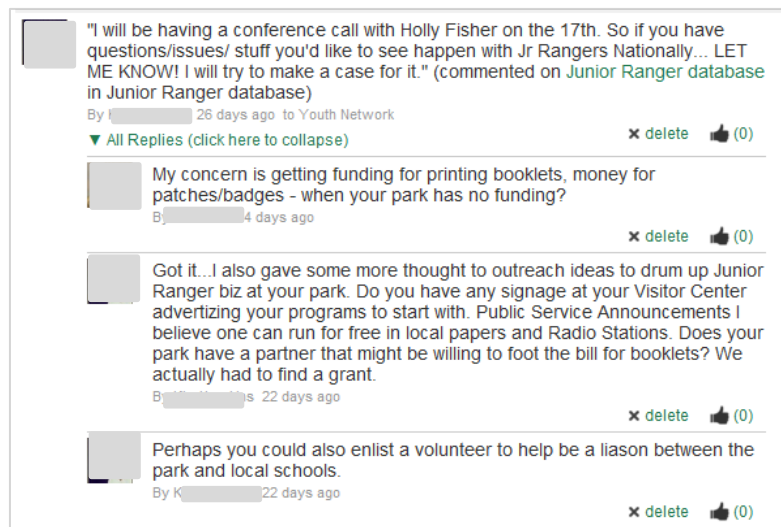
Readers

Readers are the unseen forces that affect a community. Community owners estimate that **there are approximately 10 to 100 readers per active poster**. They represent a combination of people new to the community, those not yet comfortable in posting, people who will *only* read and *never* post, and people who come in and then drift away without engaging. This group represents a huge pool of potential *active* members. Gentle efforts to pull them in with welcoming email, offering of guides, greeters or mentors and other efforts are well rewarded. The readers also play another very important role: audience to the active posters.

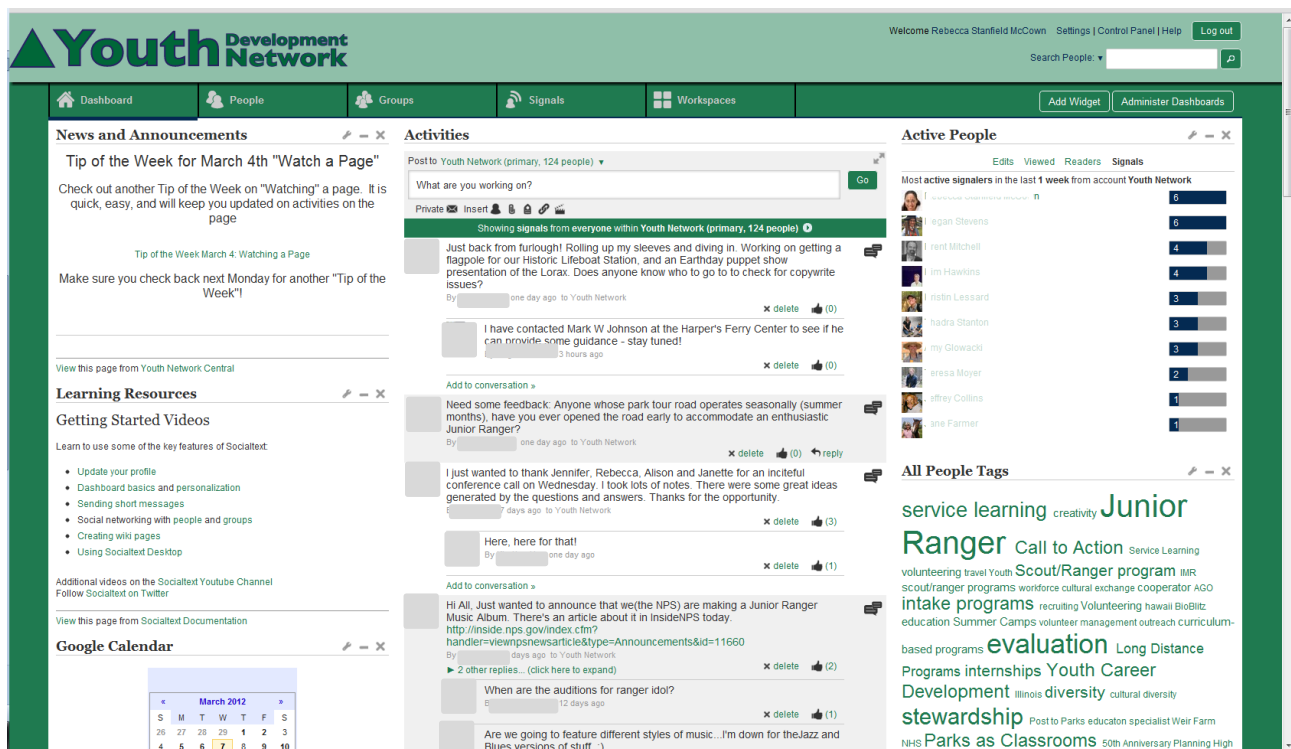
Excerpted and adapted from a blog post by Nancy White, Co-author of *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities* with Etienne Wenger & John D. Smith

Even though use of the platform is still gaining momentum, collaborative conversations on the network are increasing and participants are continuing to form groups based on

common programmatic interests. Discussions on the site continue to address challenges that youth program managers face in implementing programs, developing educational activities, recruiting, and understanding changing administrative processes. Members are sharing information about successful elements of existing programs, and they are exchanging resource materials and ideas to inform the development of new programs. Some participants have also begun to connect offline through phone calls (scheduled through communication on the site) to engage in further discussion about certain topics.



Screen capture of a conversation on the platform.



Screen capture of the main page of the platform.

Support Team Functions

The Support Team has been continuing its role as facilitator of the Youth Development Network. Since the pilot was launched, the Support Team has hosted three training sessions to introduce and provide participants with guided hands-on experience on the platform. These trainings have proven to be very beneficial for participants. Another role of the Support Team has been to monitor the platform and facilitate dialogue among the participants by highlighting important and interesting questions, connecting participants with similar interests, and providing resources.

Beginning in February, the support team has been taking an even more active role in fostering activity on the platform to determine what effect this has on increasing connections among participants. While this type of support can require a significant investment of time, it is critical to the success of the pilot, particularly as participants are still becoming comfortable with the platform.

Next Steps for the Pilot

Building on what was learned from the first four months of the pilot and the focus groups with the early adopters, the following are next steps for the pilot:

- Conduct more “hands-on” training sessions for participants. Training sessions will be conducted in small groups, allowing for personalized attention based on the current needs of participants.
- Increased engagement efforts to reach non-active users. The Support Team is continuing to contact non-active users to identify what barriers and challenges they are experiencing. Personalized support is being provided to get non-active users “up and running.”
- Conduct conference call/webinar conversations focused on “hot topics” identified through the network. Potential topics include: transitioning to Pathways, Teacher-Ranger-Teacher, mentoring, and recruitment of diverse youth.
- Pose monthly questions or discussion topics to participants. These monthly "Call to the Field" segments will strengthen the dialogue and content on the platform.
- Improve the organization of content on the site (number and structure of groups, arrangement of workspaces, etc.) to make the site easier to search and navigate.
- Further connect the pilot with the *Call to Action*, particularly Action Item #33 *Destination Innovation* and the items related to youth engagement. The Support team will provide updates on the pilot on the C2A Discussion Forum and use the pilot platform to encourage dialogue about implementation and progress on the *Call to Action*.

Timeline of Key Activities

Timeframe	Activity
<u>2011</u>	
March 1-3	Network Project Team holds meeting to develop the concept for a Network for Innovation and Creativity
May 11	Network concept is presented to the NLC and a pilot focused on youth programming agreed to
June-September	Explored technology and implementation options for running the pilot
July	Applications to participate in the Youth Development Pilot are distributed to the field
August	Participants were selected from application pool
August 23	Kick-off webinar was held with presentation by Deputy Director Mickey Fearn and NPS Advisory Board Member Meg Wheatley
September	Engaged Socialtext, the social media provider, through CSI/QLF partnership
October 18	Social media platform opened to participants
October 25 & November 1	Held two Socialtext software training webinars
November	Pilot participants were asked to submit descriptions of programs that reflected the goals of C2A #33: Homegrown
November	Submitted update on the pilot launch to the NELC
November 16	Presentation and discussion on pilot and network concept with Deputy Director Fearn, Meg Wheatley, and Michael Creasey
December 12	Presented pilot up to NPS leadership and concept for the Collaborative for Innovative Leadership
December 21	Presented pilot update to NPS Communications and Workforce Enrichment offices
<u>2012</u>	
January 25	Provided “hands-on” training for a small group of participants
February 6-7	Contact non-active users to encourage participation
February	Submitted update on the pilot to the NELC
February 14, 15, 16	Conduct focus groups with early adopters
February 20	Introduce “Tip of the Week”: Short tips and tricks for using Socialtext
February 28	Introduce “Call to the Field”: Questions and topics posed to the community to highlight important issues, challenges, and resources
March 7	Introduce weekly training opportunities. These trainings will either provide an overview of the platform, focus on specific topics, or be short trainings related to the “Tip of the Week”
June	Interim report on the Youth Development Pilot and potential next steps
October	Year 1 update on Youth Development Pilot and recommended next steps